

About Planning Councils

The National Association of Planning Councils (NAPC) is a membership organization of citizen-led, community-based non-profit social service planning agencies which serve small and large communities throughout the United States. Some councils are newly developing while others have served their communities for over fifty years. *Planning councils all across the country share a common mission: to marshal human and financial resources to improve the quality of life for people in their communities.*

Councils study current human service issues; identify needs, work toward prevention, and develop planned responses to crucial problems; advocate for improvement in human service systems and services, and the laws and policies which affect them; develop pilot projects; monitor the effectiveness of community initiatives; and provide information about human services and community needs for individuals, agencies, policy-makers and the general public. Councils are known for their "big-picture" perspective on community needs and possibilities for positive change; their neutral objectivity, making decisions based upon facts; their inclusiveness; their recognized leadership in bringing the public, private and nonprofit sectors "around the same table" on many issues; and their capacity for long term action.

Planning Councils: Historical Perspective

Beginning as "trade associations" of social agencies, planning councils gradually shifted to become citizen-led organizations focused more broadly on community concerns.

In the late 1800's and early 1900's, planning in the human services field began to emerge, with the establishment of Charity Organization Societies and Councils of Social Agencies. Charity Organization Societies reflected an effort to provide some coordination among the many agencies providing emergency relief for basic needs, while Councils of Social Agencies reflected the desire of the rapidly

increasing number of agencies for coordination and cooperative efforts in the development of resources for the correction of injustices. These early emphases on coordination, community education, and social action and reform have continued to influence the social planning movement.

Community Chests/United Ways and Councils: The early work described above preceded the existence of federated fund raising efforts. As Community Chests (forerunners of United Ways) began to emerge, social planning received increased support and attention, since implicit in the fund allocation function was the need for decision-making and priorities-setting, which required planning. As Community Chests increasingly became voluntary efforts to meet community needs, the necessity and potential for planning emerged further, with increased attention to monitoring, evaluation, response to changing needs, and leadership in guiding the voluntary sector's impact on a community's human service efforts. Some Community Chests and, later, United Ways developed their own planning functions, especially for operational needs; others relied on, and provided funding for, local Councils of Social Agencies to meet their own, and their local communities', planning needs.

By 1930, there were about thirty Councils of Social Agencies in the United States.

By 1965, there were over five hundred human service planning councils in the United States and Canada. During that relatively short span of existence, local councils showed significant flexibility and ingenuity in carrying out community planning. Beginning as "trade associations" of social agencies, concentrating primarily on agency standards, working relationships, interagency affairs and common services, they gradually shifted to broader, citizen-led organizations focused more broadly on community concerns.

In the late sixties, councils had moved increasingly toward "problem-centered" planning. Their form of organization and methods reflected this trend. In many instances, "health and welfare" councils around the country added committees to their structures that focused on specific problems or concerns. Fueled by the "War on Poverty," government involvement in community planning grew considerably. Councils worked in partnership with local governments in developing collaborative community based planning and promoting voluntary/public partnerships.

Councils' Planning Activities:

Historically, councils were charged with the role of being the community's means of planning for services to meet health, welfare, and recreation needs. This role and its attendant activities varied as time passed, experience was gained, and conditions and problems changed. However, planning activities at most councils were generally encompassed in one or more of the following four:

Problem-solving planning ... directed toward the development and implementation of plans to resolve specific community problems. It is a comprehensive approach which endeavors to determine the causes and characteristics of a problem and arrive at preventive measures to deal effectively with it. This type of broad planning approach frequently calls for the redirection of existing agency programs and the development of new designs of service. Illustrative of the problems requiring this type of planning are mental illness, chronic illness, youth unemployment, juvenile delinquency, school dropouts and family dependency.

Inter-agency program development and coordination ... directed to the maintenance of a high degree of integration in the programs of the many separate agencies in the community. This type of planning is concerned with establishing continuing effective working relationships, developing a coordinated service approach wherein both governmental and voluntary agencies become integral parts of the community's system of services and where intake, referral and communication are effective and efficient.

Agency administrative planning ... carried out largely within an agency. Its focus is on program, standards of operation, administrative efficiency and fulfillment of the agency function. Councils have facilitated this type of planning through consultation, guidance and provision of direction in meeting community needs.

Community policy planning ... the identification of current and emerging health, welfare and recreation needs and the development of immediate and long-range plans to meet them, together with the strategy of carrying these plans into action. It includes community education directed toward better understanding of governmental and voluntary health and welfare programs; stimulation of public concern and action on unmet community needs; preparation of and support for legislative measures; adoption of positions on public issues; and development of long-range plans providing general guidance on prevention of needs and the manner in which services are to be coordinated, administered and delivered. Many councils moved toward a focus on community policy planning, which would guide the direction of the other three phases and stimulate development and implementation of key community goals.

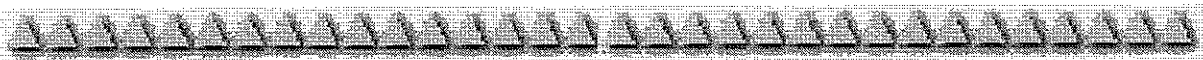
Between the late 1960's and late 1980's, many planning councils disappeared. This dramatic change was related primarily to:

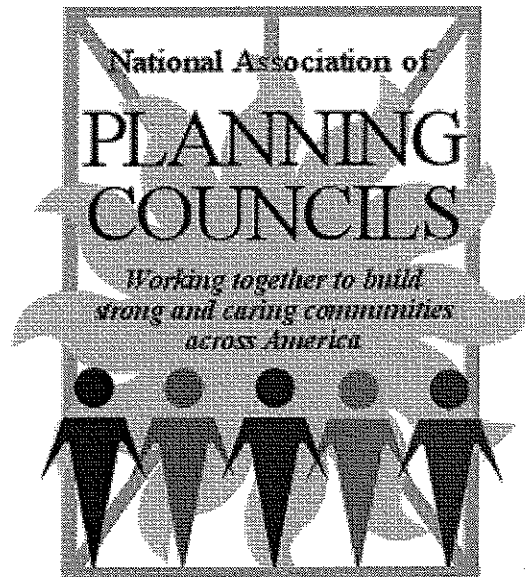
- the emergence of government-sponsored planning mechanisms in the 60's and 70's that were single-problem focused.
- the growth of "special focus" research and planning groups emphasizing the needs of a particular age group, geographic location, or special concern.
- the merging of independent community planning groups into United Ways to better assist specific planning for allocations and special initiatives.
- the lack of capacity of council professional staff and community leadership to shift to a more sophisticated role, often focused on policy planning and related action.

As early as the late 1960's, executives from some of the larger planning councils were meeting informally to discuss issues of common interest. During the '80's the group expanded to include representatives of other smaller planning groups with like concerns. Many councils and related planning groups joined together to form the **National Association of Planning Councils (NAPC)**, incorporated in 1992.

Today, planning council-like organizations are working broadly all across the country, marshalling human and financial resources to improve the quality of life for the people in their communities. Many other similar entities, narrower in scope, also exist. Other communities are now expressing interest in exploring the possibilities of establishing a local planning council. This desire likely will grow as local communities face increased responsibilities for addressing their own problems.

The National Association of Planning Councils (NAPC) plays a vital role in facilitating communication, coordination and cooperative efforts, linking planning councils from throughout the nation with information, services and technical assistance designed to strengthen and support their important work in local communities.





About Community Planning

Elements of QUALITY COMMUNITY PLANNING,
as Demonstrated by the Member Organizations of the
National Association of Planning Councils (NAPC)

Today's planning councils, and their roles and defining characteristics, are remarkably similar to the original ones of over sixty years ago.

The job of today's councils is broad ... to stitch together the whole varied range of separate public, voluntary, and, increasingly, private activities into a rational, effective response to human needs which is appropriate to each of their particular communities.

Today's councils are guided by an informed perspective on their communities' social assets, resources, and needs. This perspective comes from their wide and varied research and information gathering activities — the unique council asset which guides all their other actions.

Today's councils are organized to provide leadership for effective community-wide as well as more localized neighborhood action on important issues and concerns.

DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS

Today's councils' common characteristics include:

Citizen-led board of directors, with leaders from all sectors ... people from business, health, education, religion, labor, government, civic groups, and geographic areas

Incorporation as a separate 501(c)3 charitable non-profit (or possibly within one)

Non-partisan and non-sectarian

Driven by a mission to broadly build the quality of community life through community-wide planning focused on addressing human development needs

A merging of lay and professional interests, skills and experience to guide and ensure effective community planning and organizations

A highly competent, skilled professional staff with varied knowledge, experience, and abilities

VALUES, STRATEGIES, METHODS

Today's councils promote and apply distinct values, strategies and methods, including:

An openness for involvement of a wide constituency in decision making throughout its board and committee structures, supporting community sanction for council actions

A "big-picture" perspective on community needs, problems, and possibilities for improvements, generating a broad agenda of work

A plan of work based on an objective review of data and information from a wide variety of sources, (i.e., census reports, sponsored task forces and coalitions, public surveys, focus groups, consumers' views).

Action based on consensus among those most concerned about a particular issue

A planned approach for involving those directly affected by critical problems and needs in organizational decisions — a strong emphasis on a "bottom-up" approach to planning

An effective working relationship with all sectors, voluntary, public and private, to help promote effective community-wide action.

A close connection at the neighborhood level to provide a strong link between community-wide action to support effective integration of helping resources where people are — in their homes, schools, churches, neighborhoods

A recognition that, for the comprehensive community planning function to occur, organizations such as councils at the community-wide level are the critical link — the "intersection" between the neighborhoods and the state and nation

FUNCTIONS & ROLES

Today's councils have several common core functions and tasks they perform to fulfill their important and broad role in the community. All councils serve their communities as an ongoing:

Researcher and data gatherer on key trends and developments related to human needs and helping resources, as well as needed changes for improvements and possibilities for successful action.

Planner for identifying most critical concerns to be addressed.

Organizer for convening and mobilizing resources for effective action on a broad range of often interrelated needs and concerns.

Voice for improved social policy decisions to support recommended action.

Source of technical assistance to plan and develop specific recommended changes, including new programs and organization of programs and agency relationships.

Developer of new resources, financial and other, to help support recommended action for change.

Advisor to public and voluntary local and state (and national, when appropriate) decision makers on better use of their respective resources.

As a part of implementing these "core functions," or as distinct separate functions, many councils are involved in important additional activities, including:

Community education -- promoting awareness among the general public, decision makers, and service providers on important trends, issues, and needed actions.

Evaluation -- determining the effectiveness of programs, community-focused initiatives, and specific service arrangements.

Provider of information to help link people to needed assistance, often through general and/or specialized information and referral services, resource directories, etc.

Training source for service providers, volunteers, and program managers on improved job performance.

Promotion of voluntary citizen participation -- sometimes by developing and/or managing community volunteer centers.

In some instances, councils use their flexibility and skills to further enhance their communities' capacity for action. Examples of these less common but important functions include acting as a:

Funder of services; usually part of a council's larger role of impacting a particular need; and usually as a subcontractor of "pass through" funds.

Fiscal agent for a project being funded by a private or public source which may or may not be related to the council's overall efforts to address specific needs.

Provider of various support services for non-profit agencies to further their financial, organization, and service effectiveness (including centralized purchasing, management and board training, etc).

ORGANIZATIONAL MODELS

Today's councils use different organizational model approaches, including those described below, in applying their common missions and functions:

Each council's board and professional leaders, and circumstances within each individual community, determine what approach the council will focus on. (Although a particular council's approach may emphasize a specific organizational model, this does not preclude it from also pursuing activities included in other approaches.).

"Information-resource" model:

Some councils focus much of their attention on gathering and monitoring information useful to identifying major community concerns, the resources available to help, and the ways to measure progress. In some areas, the councils may actually help facilitate needed action. However, the emphasis is on being an objective provider of information to the community as a whole.

"Problem-focused" model:

Some councils focus their activities on a selected few important community concerns — gathering information, facilitating and mobilizing needed action, and monitoring progress. In some instances, councils also may provide key support services to affected individuals, i.e., case management, making appointments for help, etc. The selection of problems to be addressed may evolve from a larger rational process involving other community groups, or may simply relate to what funding sources are available at a certain time. The goals are multi-faceted, focused on changes in social, health, and/or economic conditions.

"Community-leadership-for-change" model:

Some councils have adopted their own broad set of goals and objectives that they commit a majority of their planning and related activities to address over an extended period of time. They assess their own performance based on progress made toward each goal. Such councils position themselves to affect all aspects of these goals (i.e., child development, healthy families), including social policy, program development, community involvement, and resource allocations. They often join with other community development and civic groups to share leadership for effecting desired changes.

FUNDING SOURCES

Today's councils are funded from a variety of sources, including:

Grants from national, state, local foundations, for ongoing activities or special initiatives.

Fee for service contracts with state agencies, local department of government, private foundations and others.

Local United Ways, for core operational expenses (e.g. core staff leadership and direct expenses) and selected services.

Private donations from individuals, corporations, civic groups.

Program service fees

Sales of reports, documents, etc.

Special fund raising events

Fees from participating organizations for centralized administrative services (e.g., joint purchasing, health insurance).

Although the structures and approaches found in planning councils across the country have evolved over the years, councils' core functions have endured and remain of ongoing critical importance.

The important reliance on the leadership and vision of caring, knowledgeable and dedicated volunteers, guiding the work of capable professional staff, have always been and will continue to be keys to the success of councils' work.